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HOW STUDENTS USE VALUES IN DECISION-MAKING.

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HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ARE EXAMINING AND INTERNALIZING VALUES. THEIR FEAR OF COMMITMENT TO ANYTHING DEVIATING FROM ACCEPTED VALUES MAY HINDER THEIR CLARIFICATION OF PERSONAL GOALS AND VALUES. THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS SHOULD BE AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE GUIDANCE PROGRAM. STANDARD QUESTIONNAIRES DO NOT PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT SPECIFIC FACTORS WHICH AFFECT PERSONAL DECISIONS SUCH INFORMATION IS MORE EFFECTIVELY OBTAINED THROUGH EVALUATION OF SPONTANEOUS SAMPLES OF STUDENTS IN A DECISION-MAKING SITUATION. RELATED QUESTIONS INCLUDE--(1) WHETHER ONLY THE MATURE, INDEPENDENT STUDENT CAN EFFECTIVELY EXAMINE SUBJECTIVE DESIRES, (2) WHETHER COUNSELORS SHOULD USE STUDENTS' AFFECTIVE REACTIONS TO ALTERNATIVES AS A BASIS FOR WORKING WITH THEM, (3) WHETHER THE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IS ABLE TO DISTINGUISH PERSONAL VALUES FROM PEER, COMMUNITY, OR SCHOOL VALUES, AND, IF NOT, SHOULD THE COUNSELOR WORK WITH THE STUDENT TOWARD CLARIFYING AND DISTINGUISHING THE TWO, AND (4) WHETHER THE LIMITED LIFE EXPERIENCE OF THE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT ALSO LIMITS RATIONAL UTILIZATION OF VALUES IN DECISION MAKING. EXPERIENCES WITH GROUP COUNSELING, GROUP EXPERIENCES WITH A SIMULATION LIFE CAREER GAME, GROUP GUIDANCE SESSIONS ON DECISION MAKING, AND INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING WHICH HELPED STUDENTS DEVELOP VALUES AND MAKE DECISIONS ARE DESCRIBED. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH ARE GIVEN. THIS SPEECH WAS PRESENTED AT THE AMERICAN PERSONNEL AND GUIDANCE ASSOCIATION CONVENTION (WASHINGTON, D.C., APRIL 6, 1966). (PS)

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HOW STUDENTS USE VALUES IN DECISION-MAKING*

Dr. Barbara B. Varenhorst

Recently there was a series of arrests of students attending my high school in Palo Alto on charges of possession and use of marijuana. This caused enough stir and concern throughout the school that an assembly was held to discuss narcotics and drug usage. At this assembly a panel composed of a psychiatrist, a pediatrician, and a lawyer discussed the facts from psychological, medical and legal points of view. Following the assembly there was a great deal of reaction on the part of students because each panelist had so carefully given facts and statistics, but had not discussed the moral or ethical issue. Students were surprised that they had not been warned or threatened with herendous consequences, bur rather were given unemotional facts which they would have to evaluate individually. It was quite evident that students felt some anxiety over being given the responsibility of deciding their actions and behavior without the security of legitimate, recognized biases such as injury to health or correlation with addictive drugs. They seemed aware that this was a question of values, not of morals--or just facts--and that how they chose to behave would reveal something of their own personal, subjective values.

This incident illustrates the part values play in decision-making. It reveals that fear and risk-taking with respect to the law or to health are

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* Talk presented at the American Personnel and Guidance Association convention, Washington, D.C., April 6, 1966. It followed a presentation by Dr. Martin Katz, "Putting Prediction in its Place."

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only two factors that determine one's behavior--that when forced to make decisions on the basis of other alternatives perhaps not universally subscribed to, such as responsibility to society or usefulness of one's life, one may become confused, uneasy and indecisive. For how one chooses reveals a personal involvement which will be judged by others.

This experience clearly demonstrates that the question of values must be confronted by both counselor and student if the student is to be helped to become a free and independent decision-maker. It also points out that decision-making guidance must take into account a student's affective and motivational reactions to goals and outcomes and must consider the effect of social pressure on values.

No one who has examined decision-making guidance doubts the importance of values or questions that they must be confronted. The issue is rather how and in what form and what values. Objective probability data are relatively easy to collect and categorize; subjective values probability data are not. Little is known about how community and peer values are perceived by individuals and processed and integrated into a subjective basis for choice.

My talk is directed to this issue. I am a practicioner who has attempted to put into operation some of the ideas and theory that Dr. Katz has presented. Not all my efforts have been successful, and what I have done has raised further questions. Some of these I would like to share with you.

I believe that standard inventories and questionnaires tell us very little about the specific factors which <u>actually</u> affect personal decisions

and behavior. I believe that some of this information can be gathered by evaluating spontaneous samples of students behaving in a decision-making situation. When students are not aware that an observer is examining their values and their process of decision-making, they more accurately reveal the true factors which are determining their choices. What I have observed has caused me to raise certain questions which I hope will give direction to future work and research.

These are the questions I am raising:

1) Is considered examination of subjective desires only possible for the more mature, independent student who feels comfortable in defining and defending the reasons why he has made certain choices?

2) In addition to so-called objective alternatives, should not the counselor examine how students actually perceive these alternatives? If so, then should not the counselor work with the student on the basis of affective reaction to alternatives rather than on the basis of factual alternatives alone?

3) To what extent is the high school student and emerging young adult able to distinguish personal values from those of the community, school or peers until his environment changes and he in fact is more independent? Does it take certain major changes such as graduation from high school, going to college, taking a job, etc. before students can actually specify their own personal desires and wishes? If so, then should not the job of the counselor be to know and to clarify group values which are currently exerting pressure on the immediate decisions which affect long-range decisions?

4) Is the fact that high school students have had limited life experiences the chief obstacle to rational utilization of values in decision-making?

How does a student know what risks he will take to achieve a certain goal until he has had to take some risks? For example, a person may not know whether he will make an honest choice until he has had a chance to make a dishonest choice, until he has had some experiences with possibilities of choices involving honesty and until he has learned how he actually behaved then. If lack of experience is the cause of indecision, then a vital part of a guidance program should be to simulate realistic life experiences whereby a student can practice some of these experiences without the penalties associated with the real thing.

These are the questions that have resulted from my efforts to implement ideas and theories of the part values play in decision-making. I have attempted to do this in four guidance activities: group counseling, group experiences with a simulation Life Career Game, group guidance sessions on decision-making, and in some individual counseling. My experiences are what I share with you.

Group Counseling

Following a request from several students, I formed a group for the purpose of discussing what was meaningful in life to students and how they felt about their present activities and the demands made of them. Those who first requested such a group indicated that they wanted the group to be composed of students who represented diverse points of view and attitudes toward life. Included are eight girls and four boys, one of whom is a Negro. All have high average to very gifted academic potential. Several of the students could be classified as drastic underachievers to the degree of possibly being unable to gradaute. Others are high achievers aiming toward colleges with the highest entrance requirements.

The discussions have centered primarily on the issue of post-high school plans, and more specifically, the value of college. From their remarks it is quite evident that they are feeling anxious about the unknown after graduation. This anxiety seems to be highly related to the uncertainties they have about themselves and their own thoughts and judgments. The prevailing attitude expressed is rejection of school and the meaningless course requirements and tasks demanded of them. However, they have chosen to respond to these demands in quite different ways,with grade point averages ranging from 1.3 to 3.9. One boy even admitted that since he doesn't do the work, he has to spend his time making himself comfortable with what he is doing.

One day Rob asked the group if anyone knew what there was in the future that meant anything. Because he didn't know, he thought he would take a little vacation from school after graduation, and then eventually he would go to college, where he'd learn how to work and come to know what he wanted to do. When asked why he wanted to go to colege, he said, "Because I want to do mental work and because I like learning and college is the only way to do both." Karen responded to this by asking,"What do you think college is? It's not something that hits you over the head and does something to you. It's no different from what you're in right now."

"Yah," Rob said, "but I'll be different." Rob is currently barely making the units to graduate.

Interactions in the group have revealed the different approaches students make to clarifying goals and to establishing consistent values. Once they were discussing "finding myself" before deciding what they wanted to do in the future. One girl thought she would work for a year; another

thought she would take some creative arts classes; one boy thought he would go to Yosemite and sit on the mountains and think...all before going to college.

The tension obstructing their decision-making seems to be that they are actively seeking and examining peer values which may offer alternatives to the "false" values of their parents. Yet what they hear from each other is that decisions to go to college are not conscious choices for their friends and peers. Rather, each of them has internalized an expectation held for them by their parents which is also strongly reinforced by the school and the socio-economic environment of their community. The area where they do have freedom to choose is in the particular college which they would attend. Yet for the student who is asking "Who am I?" and "What is important to you and what has meaning for me?" his answers must come from differentiating himself from the conditioning influence of the society around him. This may be through resisting leveling influences and realizing that he must face conflict between himself and society before he has an answer.

Simulation Game

The most exciting and productive technique I have used to study students' use of values in their decision-making, as well as a way to teach decision-making, is the Life Career's Game. This is a game, developed by Sarane Boocook and James Coleman at the Johns Hopkins University, which I have adapted for our guidance program in Palo Alto. Students work in teams of two, competing against other teams in decision-making. Each team is given an identical profile of a student based on actual case material and each team is asked to plan the next twenty years of this student's life. They do this planning by making out a schedule of the way the student spends

his time throughout a typical week between the hours of 8 a.m. and 9:30 p.m. This schedule is the decision plan, and one is filled out for each of the twenty years. After a decision year has been planned, the team receives outcomes of these decisions in the form of game points in four areas of life--education, job, leisure and family life. Points are calculated on the basis of probability scales. Included in the planning is the requirement to apply for jobs, marriage, college, scholarships, etc. when these are desired. Unplanned events that occur in life, such as promotions, losing jobs, having unexpected children, divorce, etc. are introduced by selection of an unplanned events card at the end of each decision year following graduation from high school. In all their planning, students must take into consideration the results of their previous decisions and make adjustments accordingly, sometimes much to their discomfort. As scores are posted at the end of each year, discussions are held among the group members as to what different decisions have been made leading to certain outcomes. This, of course, can be quite an opportunity to look at one's values and to examine critical factors affecting life's decisions and outcomes.

I am currently using this game with two different groups. Group I is composed of Caucasian students representing a wide range of academic abilities. They are working with Mary, a Negro girl with a 3.57 GPA, whose father is earning $6,000 per year. She has been going with a boy for two years about whom she is serious. The boy friend did not go to college, however, and is currently earning $4,300 per year. Group II is an all-Negro group with more homogeneous academic potential. They are working with Diane, a white girl whose father is earning $4,500 per year and whose GPA is 3.07.

Certain patterns seem to have emerged in the two groups, revealed by the decisions and the discussions. Most teams in Group I have had Mary taking a non-academic course in high school, even though she has a 3.57 GPA. They all have had her get a part-time job at which she spends a sizeable portion of her time throughout the week. She is to enter a junior college going into a terminal program such as the dental technician program. Group II teams have had their student, Diane, taking heavy academic courses, no part-time job, other than baby sitting; and most are aiming for some college with high entrance requirements for her.

When asked why they have made certain decisions, Group I has referred to the father's income and to the boy friend. "Junior college doesn't cost as much as another type of college," and since "the boy friend doesn't amount to much, she will have to prepare herself for some type of work so she can be ready in case she has to support herself." They felt that the boy friend didn't amount to anything because he has no ambition--he didn't go to college, and he wasn't earning very much money. He would never get any place in life. When asked what getting some place in life meant, there was much conflict in opinion. Some felt it was earning a good income, others felt it was getting recognition or status for what one does, and still others felt it was that which makes one happy. Students became quite frustrated when they tried to give individual interpretations of happiness and life satisfaction. They also indicated that it was important for a girl to get a college education now since she should be prepared in case there were a divorce.

As teams have moved ahead in the decision periods, they have poured over college catalogs, scholarship information, job statistics, material on terminal programs at the local junior colleges,and other data. Part of the

information given to them in their game handbook deals with family income data based on numbers in family, number of hours required for household chores, and suggested number of hours spent in studying according to various educational levels. When one girl saw the number of hours she would have to spend doing housework once she got married, she said, "Wow! twenty-five hours of housework! I don't want to get married." The first time game scores were posted, the team that was behind loudly announced that they weren't concerned. "This is only the first year, and we have lots to go yet. Besides, we're thinking in terms of long-range plans that will pay off in the end."

Thinking of this sort leads to genuine understanding of the planning that must go into a life if one wishes to reach certain goals. And as team discussions have progressed, or as group discussions have emerged, issues have been debated and weighed. Typical debates have centered on questioning a four-year college as opposed to a junior college; lighter academic load during the school year and summer school versus a heavier load during the year with a job in the summer; a part-time job during the year versus no job at all.

This has proved to be an exciting vehicle for providing a vicarious example of adult life experiences, including the adjustments that must be made in decisions and plans based on consequences of previous decisions. At the same time, students are forced to declare their values, but in a context where the values can be revised and reevaluated and in a less personal, or threatening situation. It seems to stimulate a readiness to learn information that may have been given to them in another form at a time when they were not ready to hear or absorb. It involves students in a thoughtful comparison

of different paths a life can take, possibly arriving at the same result--in the case of the game, at equal game points.

With only this brief, pilot experience with the game, it is quite possible that we are not yet aware of all the potential that may exist in such a guidance activity. Further exploration is being planned for this.

Decision-making Group Sessions

Not long ago our counseling staff conducted sessions for four days with all our eleventh grade students to help them plan their post-high school activities. The program uses "experience tables" (rather than expectancy tables) which report the experience of other Palo Alto students going through high school and into post-high school life. The grade point average was often the important variable used. The "experiences" of students are reported as one out of ten, not as percentages, for simplification. Alternatives are reviewed and probability of outcomes in the form of grades is discussed. Since grades are not given for military service or marriage, not all possible outcomes could be given. As part of the presentation, group discussions are encouraged to assess what is being learned of the information presented.

It was evident both from the discussions and the evaluation given at the conclusion that factual data are not sufficient for engaging students in personal decision-making. The students were asking for information regarding curriculums offered at schools, college environments and atmosphere. Some of the students reacted to the sessions emotionally, through anger or open anxiety. Their comments again revealed their fear of making decisions without further information about what it would be like to go to certain colleges, or what they would be like in terms of their interests and goals once they had left high school.

It was evident that college is an "expected" decision, not an alternative. One example that was discussed was a girl who entered the tenth grade with a C average; she was aspiring to enter a college requiring a B or A average. When I asked what the students felt might be alternatives open to her, one girl immediately suggested suicide; another student suggested she could go to a junior college and transfer after two years; another felt that she could work harder in high school and earn better grades. No one suggested that she should change her goal.

This experience indicated to me that factual alternatives are frequently rejected for affective alternatives which may have been ordered and ranked according to social pressures of parents, community, and school. Perhaps with the limited knowledge of what actual alternatives may mean to them, they are not able to process the statistical data in a meaningful way. It is apparent that the program needs to be expanded to include more subjective probabilities, and other techniques should be tried to interpret the data, possibly through such means as the simulation game.

Individual Counseling

In my opinion, the clarification of values can best be done on an individual basis when a student is currently engaged in a decision-making problem. In the privacy of a conference a student may be more ready to testify to his values and to try them out in a relationship with a counselor.

Recently a student came to me to discuss making a schedule change which involved taking the same subject but changing teachers and going to a higher level. She was afraid she would hurt the teacher's feelings if she asked

to change. However, she felt the class was boring and perhaps a higher level would be more stimulating. We began to list the alternatives open to her and what each of these choices might mean to her in the long run. Then I asked her to rank these in the order of their importance to her. She became very agitated and said that she hadn't realized there were so many things to consider. She didn't feel she actually could rank them in any order.

This led me to feel that we hadn't actually uncovered the significant factors in this decision. So we discussed further. She revealed that she took every opportunity to call attention to the teacher's mistakes in a context where she wasn't exactly rude, but in a manner whereby she got evidence from the class that they thought she was clever and amusing. It finally was revealed that she did think the teacher was boring, that he was a rather dull individual, lacking in vitality and spark. However, he had been in the Peace Corps and had done things for underprivileged countries. She believed in helping others in this way, and therefore thought he must be a good person. However, she didn't really like him, but felt guilty for not liking someone who practiced principles she believed in.

She seemed relieved to have confronted what was keeping her from making a decision. No decision was made during the conference, but as she left she admitted she would now be able to think this through on her own. It appears that she was not able to utilize the decision-making process until she faced the actual conflict of values affecting her decision. She stated the conflict, at first, in acceptable terms. Actually, she was not feeling comfortable about the real conflict of feelings and values. Once she was assured that it was "safe" to feel this way, she was free to evaluate her decision.

CONCLUSION

Values are learned just as any behavior is learned. We value that which receives the greatest reward, that which characterizes people we respect and admire, and those values to which we have been exposed. It is important to recognize that we cannot learn certain values unless we have had contact with them through some type of exposure. Those values which we have learned and have internalized constitute oneb individuality, one's identity as a person. This is achieved, however, through a process of development. As a person matures, unique personal values gradually become solidified and integrated.

As counselors, we realize that the immediate decisions students are now making, such as their course choices, use of time, selection of friends, etc., represent values that are influenced at this particular stage of their development, and perhaps they represent more accurately the values of the "others" in their environment than their own unique values. At this stage they may actually verbally reject the very values which are determining their decisions because their own emerging values are not yet established and they are not yet independent.

At this critical stage in their development, when their values are being examined and internalized, the decision-making process is an extremely important part of the guidance program. As we work with students in such a program, helping them to clarify their personal goals and values, we must recognize their fear of actual commitment to anything which may deviate from so-called "safe" choices or acceptable values. They hide their insecurity behind a vocabulary screem of such terms as "happiness," "peace," "satisfaction"

and "security" when asked for some commitment of personal goals and values. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, I find, to get students to define these terms in specific and personal words, even in individual conferences with them.

It is for this reason that I find the activities such as I have described, particularly the simulation game, a means of helping them overcome this barrier. As students become involved in these various counseling situations, conflicts are examined, meaningful facts are taught and segments of life situations are experienced, which all contribute to a more informed, considered decision-making person. After a student has participated in such an activity, individual counseling may more productively achieve what Dr. Katz has described. The student may then be able to examine his personal values in some type of systematic ranking and use this evaluation in his decision-making.

Each time I have worked with students in any of the activities I have described I have obtained a clearer understanding of the use students make of values in their planning and choices. This understanding has helped me in my work with students individually. Such data need to be systematically collected through controlled observations and inquiry of these techniques. This is a fruitful area of study for continued guidance research.